

Teaching English to Young Learners: Some Points to be Considered

Juhana

Universitas Terbuka
Pondok Cabe, (Tangerang Selatan, Indonesia)

ABSTRACT— *Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners needs special approach since young learners have special characteristics. It is stated that the improvement of abilities to learn foreign language is started from the early age. If teachers don't use appropriate teaching methods to teach English to young learners, the achievement of learning process may not work well. That is way, in order to be successful in teaching English for young learners, it is quite necessary for teachers to comprehend young learners' characteristics. It is important because it will influence how a teacher creates a lesson appropriate with young learners' characteristics. This paper tries to elaborate some points to be considered by teachers of young learners in teaching English as a foreign language.*

Keywords— teaching English, young learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Young learners learn directly from their surroundings not only from their peers but also from the adults. We should understand their need and support them to learn the English language. Therefore, as teachers, especially English teachers should know young learners' characteristic and how they learn a foreign language. Teachers' knowledge of learner's age and characteristics can also help them successfully in implementing their teaching methods in the classroom. Teachers teaching young learners are expected to be able to find various and interesting methods since children are easily to be bored. Teaching methods and learning materials given to students must be enjoyable and interesting in order to maintain their interest in learning. The followings are the elaboration regarding to some points to be considered in teaching English to young learners.

2. WHO CHILDREN ARE AND HOW THEY LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Knowing and understanding young learners' characteristics are necessary for young learners' teachers. It will influence many aspects in teaching English for young learners in order to have effective teaching such as teaching style, methods, learning materials, lesson plan, and the way of getting along with them. Children's characteristics can be distinguished from both biological and social point of view. In general, biological is to do with children's inborn characteristics that will grow and develop, while in social point of view sees children the ones who need any help from knowledgeable people to expand their knowledge (Pinter, 2006). Regarding biological, Piaget (in Pinter, 2006) explains four states of development that all children will go through i.e. *sensory-motor stage* (from birth to two years of age), *pre-operational stage*, (from two to seven years of age), *concrete operational stage* (from seven to eleven years of age), and *formal operational stage* (from eleven years onwards). Regarding learning foreign language some experts explain about characteristics of young learners as follows:

Pinter (2006) confirms that *young learners have a great curiosity to try new things and to explore concrete to abstract things*. It is in line with Sadler (1974) who stated that children learn from concrete to abstract and also they are naturally curious and develop quickly as individuals. Therefore, teacher should avoid teaching abstract concepts and focus on concrete items that children understand and relate to. In addition to, teacher can use media or realia in delivering the materials in order that the students are able to understand easily.

Giving many experiences for young learners in learning language is important to do because as Cameron (2001) said that *young learners actively construct meaning from their experiences*. Harmer (2001) also explains that young learners get their understanding not only from explanation but also from what they see and hear, learn when they have a chance to touch and interact with (experience it). In this notion, Scott (1990) and Mustafa (2003) state that children in primary or elementary setting generally learn by way of physical activities (learning by doing). They learn through hands-on experiences and through manipulation of objects in the environment. In other words, learning will come from the real experience from the children's life.

It is highly suggested for teacher to create interesting, fun, enjoyable and fun lesson for young learners. It is because *young learners have a quite short attention span and are easy to get bored* (Slattery and Willis, 2001). It is similar to what Harmer (2001) says that unless activities are extremely engaging, they get bored easily, losing interest after ten

minutes or so. While Brown (2001) exclaims that children have limit in intellectual development, attention span, and sensory inputs. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) also state that children have a very short attention and concentration span. It means that teachers should be able to maintain children's focus and attention.

Young learners are active learners and thinkers. Children construct knowledge from actively interacting with the physical environment in developmental stages. On this notion teachers should facilitate their students in having many experiences in order that they can construct knowledge through the experiences. Let them do various activities that enable them to experience many things.

Young learners are keen to talk about themselves, and respond well to learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topics in the classroom and the like (Harmer, 2001). This means that children have a tendency to relate what they are learning to what they are doing by themselves. They love learning something having relation to their daily life. For this purpose teacher should be able to choose learning material related to their 'world'.

Young learners learn best when learning is kept whole, meaningful, interesting and functional (Mustafa, 2002, Brown, 2001). Children should be given opportunity to make their own choices. They will relate these choices with their personal wants and needs so it will make English learning become meaningful.

Young learners learn by thinking in term of theme (Shin, 2007). They are able to deal with one thing at a time without much difficulty. Teaching or presenting a lot of things to them at once may cause frustration and failure, both to children and the teachers.

Young learners learn best as a community of learners in non-competitive environment (Mustafa, 2003). This principle implicates that individual competition should be avoided because it can be stressful and overwhelm them. Play games where everyone wins, or where you do not single out a winner. Scott (1990) adds that children also learn in social context, in groups where some group members more than others.

3. ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF GOOD LEARNING MATERIALS FOR CHILDREN

Having good learning materials for young learners are important aspects that teacher should concern in teaching English to young learners. Giving young learners with suitable materials for them will make the teaching learning process be effective and meaningful. Teachers need to know their students' present knowledge in order to extend their knowledge and their need. That's quite important because young learners will be motivated in learning for a period if the learning material meets their need. In addition, it should be born in mind that the material used to young learners should suit their cognitive development stage (Cox cited in Nicholls, 2002). The followings are essential principles of good learning materials for young learners related to the how they learn a foreign language.

Young learners have a great curiosity to try new things and to explore concrete to abstract things. For this reason, teachers of young learners should be able to give materials that accommodate young learners' curiosity with suitable activities such as playing with sand or water, going to the zoo, building with toy bricks and in abstract term teachers should give them the opportunities to talk things through with others (Pinter, 2006). For instance, start with familiar topics such as colors, numbers, greetings, animals, fruit, food and drink, families, body parts, shapes, clothing, the weather, days of the week and everyday sentences and phrases.

Young learners actively construct meaning from their experiences. They learn through hands-on experiences and through manipulation of objects in the environment. Therefore, good teachers need to provide materials that enable them to have learning experiences which encourage young learners to get information from a variety of sources. Young learners have to engaged in activities of language is a part; they need to be working on meaningful task and use language to carry out these task.

Young learners focus on the immediate here and now context situation. Teachers should not give the materials that beyond the situation of here and now context. In other words, teacher can use materials available in the class that young learners can directly see and can make sense of new experiences by relating them to what they already know. For example, when teacher wants to teach about color, teacher can use the color of objects in class such as wall, table, chair, and the like.

Young learners have a quite short attention span and are easy to get bored. Thus teachers should be flexible enough to move on to the next exercise when they see their students getting bored and give them various teaching techniques and materials such as by playing games, watching, imitating, listening, doing physical movement, singing and so forth. Choose the activities that can accommodate the children's short span of attention.

Young learners learn through their own individual actions and exploration. The lesson materials should be explorative and contain many aspects to be exposed. The materials are designed with involving their sensory aids. It can help them to internalize the concepts. The smell of flowers, the touch of plants and fruits, the taste of food, and so forth. The use of audiovisual aids like video, pictures, tape, music and the like are important elements in their language teaching (Brown, 2001).

Young learners are keen to talk about themselves, and respond well to learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topics in the classroom. It is worth considering giving them material that are within their prior knowledge

so that by sufficient demonstration they will learn language. The suitable materials that can be used for example, a topic about family, friends, objects in the house, objects in the playground, food, fruit, etc.

Young learners often learn indirectly rather than directly. Teachers should provide materials promoting the activities that can accelerate their learning English from the surrounding, for instance by asking them to write about objects they find on the way home in English, listen to song, watch films, etc.

Young learners learn best when learning is kept whole, meaningful, interesting and functional. The suitable materials for this principle are the materials that will make young learners find it easy and meaningful, such as story lines, or real life conversation. In order to have meaningfulness, children should be given opportunities to make their own choices. They will relate these choices with their personal wants and needs then it becomes meaningful for them.

Young learners learn by thinking in term of theme. Teachers should not use all the subjects' material at once as it is possible to be done in adult classes. Limit the material based on their timely need. For instance, in introducing 'pronoun', teach them *I* and *You* first then next session followed by *He* and *She*.

Young learners learn best as a community of learners in non-competitive environment. Teachers should give children the materials that encourage them to use the language for different social purposes, for instance by talking and doing things in social context. By using the language for social communication in the group, children will acquire the language.

4. ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF HOW TO FACILITATE YOUNG LEARNERS LEARN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN

How to facilitate children learning English as a foreign language is another aspect that young learners' teachers should notice. Regarding this Cameron (2001) suggested that teachers may help young learners tackle even the most demanding tasks with enthusiasm and willingness (Cameron, 2001). There are several ways to facilitate young learners learning a foreign language proposed by Mustafa (2003) and Shin (2006) as follows:

Use English more frequent to provide exposure to the language. Young learners need to be exposed to a variety of uses English around them, both spoken and written (Moon, 2000). To help students acquire English the teachers should speak English from the beginning of each English lesson (Slatery and Wills, 2001). Regarding this issue Halliwell (2004) explains advantages of using English in English classroom among others are; it will encourage students to trust their instinct to predict meaning despite limited linguistics understanding. Using English more frequent than young learners' native language does not only provide an element of indirect learning in that the children are not concentrating on learning what they are listening to but also the brain is processing it. The other advantage is the English language used in the classroom confirms the idea that it is something they actually use for real and not just something they do exercise and games in. And another advantage is that it increases the amount of exposure the young learners get to the language.

Use activity-based teaching-learning techniques (e.g. TPR, games, objects). Learning language will be effective if teachers are able to choose appropriate teaching- learning techniques to be implemented in their classroom. There are various activities-based teaching-learning techniques that teachers can apply in teaching English such as TPR, games, object, and the like. These techniques can help young learners to be active, enthusiastic, and motivated because those are fun enjoyable for them. Total Physical Response (TPR) is effective method of introducing children to a foreign language. It is based on the idea that the natural response to understanding a command is a physical response (Mustafa, 2008). Regarding this Philips (2004) explains that TPR is a useful and adaptable teaching technique especially for primary students Philip. Using this method, young learners can listen to their teacher telling them what to do and they do it. In addition, this method can also give some enjoyment and fun for young learners.

Another technique that teachers can apply in English classroom for young learners is games. Games are so useful and so important. It is not just because they are fun but partly because the fun element creates a desire to communicate and partly because games can create unpredictability. Games are also effective opportunity for indirect learning (Halliwell, 1992).

Use various techniques for short periods of time. It is important for teachers to vary the types of learning activities since young learners lose interest more quickly (Cameron, 2001). Variety is the key and with the very young, lots of short, simple, activities are best suited to their attention span. Keep the learning aims very simple and build in plenty of child-friendly practice tasks to allow them to practice your target language again and again. Providing them activities with lots of brightly colored visuals is one way to take their attention and to keep them engaged in activities. Young learners usually only concentrate for short periods of time thus make sure that teachers stop or change activity when they are bored or restless. This might be after only a few minutes.

Focus on functional English for vocabulary development, and for immediate fulfillment of communicative needs of the learners. With the purpose of building students' vocabularies teachers should focus on language function like, 'what a beautiful day', 'May I borrow your pen?', 'Do you know what I mean?'. 'What's your hobby?', etc. Teachers should be able to choose teaching strategies that help young learners figure out the meaning on their own. In other words teachers should teach vocabularies in contextual meaning. Beside, it is quite useful to teach vocabularies to young learners by repeating the words so that it will make them familiar with the vocabulary item.

Reiterate often to ensure the acquisition of English. In order to make the students acquire the language in optimum way, the teacher should repeat the pronunciation of the words often. He or she can reiterate the words in their context; so that students are able to recognize the context where the words more appropriately used. It must be remembered that since teachers are probably the only model the young learners may be exposed to, teachers should improve their pronunciation if they have problem with it. In addition, young learners need opportunities to use and repeat the new language that they are studying in order to have more the acquisition of the language.

Provide useful, acquisition-promoting routines. Young learners function well within a structured environment and enjoy repetition of certain routines and activities. Having basic routines in the classroom can help to manage young learners (Shin, 2007). Young learners need to repeat language items many times to get them to 'stick' so don't be afraid to repeat games or do several different activities with the same language topic or set of words. Young learners often love to repeat the same song or story as it gives them a sense of confidence and familiarity. Routines also help children relax and not worry about being able to follow the sequences of events and activities in the classroom.

Provide print-rich environment in English. In order to create English environment teachers should design condition that enables young learners to become accustomed to English words or sentences. Teachers can put some prints such as the rules in the classroom, list of vocabularies, or pictures such as the picture of part of body, picture of animals and the like in the classroom. By this way children will be familiar and have descriptions about those words or pictures. This can also make them memorize the words because they always see or read the words and pictures when they are in the classroom. In addition, the words or pictures designed with colorful or interesting art will attract students' interest and motivate them in learning.

5. CONCLUSION

It is quite suggested that teaching English for young learners should be appropriately conducted in order to be successful. Having understood some literatures of teaching English to young learners, English teachers of young learners will know how to teach English appropriately to young learners. By this, teachers could determine the effective and suitable teaching methods to their students and create a positive environment for English teaching. In addition, teachers of English to young learners need to have a comprehension of who young learners are and how they learn language as well as young learners' characteristics. This will result in a more effective teaching learning process.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, H.D, Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy, (Addison-Wesley Longman Inc), San Fransisco, 2001
- [2] Cameron, L, Teaching Language to Young Learners, (Press. Cambridge), Cambridge University, 2001
- [3] Harmer, J, The Practice of English Language Teaching, (Pearson Education Limited), England, 2001
- [4] Halliwell, S, Teaching English in the Primary Classroom, (Pearson Education Limited), England, 2004
- [5] Hudelson, S, EFL Teaching and Children. A-Topic Based Approach, English Teaching Forum. 29. 240, 1991
- [6] Krogh, S.L, Educating Young Children, (McGrow-Hill, Inc), USA, 1994
- [7] Mustafa, B, EFL For Young Learners, (Writing Team of CREST Bandung), Bandung, 2003
- [8] Mustafa, B, Teaching English to Young Learners: Principles & Techniques, (UPI), Bandung, 2008
- [9] Moon, J, Children Learning English, (MacMillan Heinemann), Oxford, 2000
- [10] Nicholls, Gill, Learning to Teach: A Handbook for Primary and Secondary school Teachers, (Kogan Page Limited), London. 2002
- [11] Pinter, A, Teaching Young Language Learners, (University Press), Oxford, 2006
- [12] Phillips, S, Young learners, (Oxford University Press), Oxford, 2004
- [13] Sadler, John. E, Concept in Primary Education, (George Allen & Unwin Limited), London, 1974
- [14] Scot and Ytreberg, Teaching English to Children, (Pearson Education.Ltd), Harlow, 1990
- [15] Shin, Joan Kang, Ten Helpful Ideas for Teaching English To Young Learners. English teaching Forum, Vol.44, no.2, 2007, Retrieved on April 27, 2010, at <http://exchange.state.gov/forum/vol44/no2/p2.htm>
- [16] Slatery, M. and Willis, J, English for Primary Teachers, (Oxford University Press), London, 2001